

Tropes, oxymoron, and discursive construction of ethnicity: the case of muisca people in Colombia and its ethnopolitics of memory

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I want to begin this chapter with an experience that I had some weeks ago. I went with my wife, my daughter, and a couple of friends to the “Swift Horse Woman Native American Festival” in Mt. Aetna, Pennsylvania. The first feature I could note was that the dancers and singers did not belong to a specific native-American ethnic group. A story teller conducted the event, and when he announced a new performance, a cross-cultural group of women and men started different dances, while the singers, a group formed by men with long hair –some ones blond and with goatees– played their drums and yelled long and high pitch sounds. Some women dancers had native-American phenotype, while others could be confused with descendants of the Amish –of course without their typical clothes.

I was walking by the different craft shops when I found perfect souvenirs for my wife and daughter. An artisan was selling feathers and musical instruments. After I told him that I was from Colombia and I had been at similar indigenous events, he clearly told me three things. First, his parents were from Europe, and although he had white skin he recognized himself as native-American, as a Mohican. When I asked him why, he only answered: “For political convictions” –and accompanied his phrase with body language that said ‘Why not?’. Second, the man told me that the meeting had the goal of being ‘cross-cultural’. Although

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I could see six flags that represented the six native nations of the US –according to the seller–, the groups of dancers and singer were formed by people from different sites of the country. Third, nobody belonged to a native reservation officially recognized by the US State; however, each person that performed an act introduced him/herself as member of a tribe. The seller also gave me his opinions about the event: he said that ‘they were acting’ –referring to others– and that the ‘real’ Indian meetings were different.

In short, the seller had blurred the boundaries between himself and the “others”; he cannot clearly be located in a specific side. He was a white man that recognized that he was not an original native-American, but he was not part of the others who ‘were acting’. He did not like to be a white; then, he validated his transit, his displacement, in other words, his cross-identity.

During the event it was impossible to avoid connecting some elements with my work. In a different shop, a woman was selling t-shirts with images that represented the Nation’s founder fathers: Red Cloud, Geronimo, Sitting Bull, and other Indian leaders in the history of the US. On one I read: “Can we trust in the government? Ask an Indian”. Sitting Bull’s face on the clothes remind me of the famous Battle of Little Big Horn, when the territorial order of the state of Dakota was established, based on the distribution of its original people in Indian reservations. In 1876, the same year as the battle, many miles to the south, one community near Bogota, Colombia, was buying parts of the Mount Majuy’s piedmont to maintain its *resguardo* –indigenous territory– and its social difference. The indigenous community of Cota is one of five officially recognized by the Colombian State as one of the Muisca ethnic groups. As well as the Sioux people, the Muisca people learned to not trust in the government, which had wanted to finish the *resguardos* and to force the indigenous people to join as part of the remaining *mestiza* population. That was the cornerstone of the modern project of the Nation since the Colombian politics of 1830s. After some time, the members of this community stopped naming themselves as indigenous; that word was related to a memory of humiliation and exclusion. The same situation occurred in other communities whose members recognized themselves as peasants or *mestizos* and began to live in many central regions of Colombia as normal citizens.

But today many people talk about the “Muisca Awakening”, my doctoral research topic. The communities of Cota and Chía had retained their ethnic status, but others as Bosa, Suba and Sesquilé reborn since the political changes in the frame of the Constitution of 1991. At the same time, other communities were formed by mestizos and non-indigenous in some towns and cities such as Bogota and Tunja, which were the ancient Muisca’s main government centers. During seven years of permanent fieldwork among different Muisca communities –officially recognized and non-recognized by the State– I found situations such as the ones I saw in Pennsylvania. Again, the ethnic identities are based on

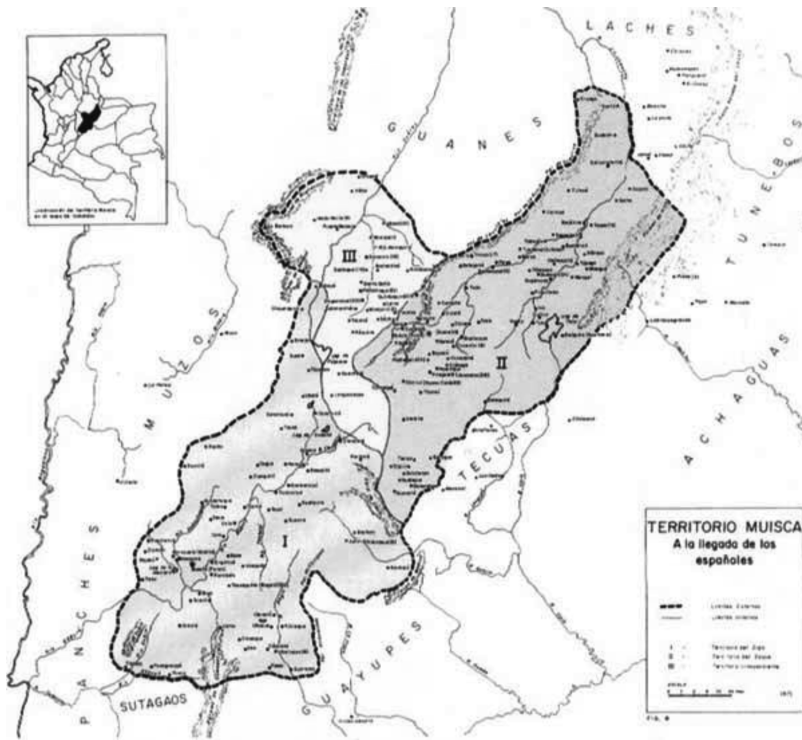
“political convictions” and the members of different groups, communities, organizations and movements are located in blurred boundaries. Currently we can find on Facebook a group named “Indian Mestiza Peasant Urban Tribal Muisca Community”. Therefore, the Muisca Awakening is an ethno-political field composed by a variety of groups that have proposed alternative ways to create and to reproduce collective identities and citizen projects, based on a renewed Muisca ideology and lifestyle, as well as the multiculturalism and the pluralistic philosophy of the current Colombian Political Constitution.

I want to present in this chapter some elements that comprised my current ethnographic work about the processes of recovery of Muisca identity and memory, and the political issues involved in these. In the first part, I will argue why it is important to study the ethnic groups’ nature since their conflicts and without understand them as closed and taken for granted, mainly inspired in some political and academic principles of contemporary studies about ethnicity, multiculturalism and indigenous ethno-politics. For this, I will expose some structural elements that form the context and the historic and political frame from which the Muisca Awakening has been possible. In the second part, I will show how the Muisca Ethno-political project is based in three structural elements: territory, organization and spirituality. Based on the last one, I will argue that Muisca ethnicity is a discursive construction in which some linguistic figures as tropes and oxymoron form a symbolic strategy to lie the communities with memory and identity issues.

The Muisca people: yesterday and today

The Muisca culture was the result of a large series of immigrations and transformations in the demographic dynamics of the central region of Colombia (Langebaeck, 1996). The archaeology indicates that about 800 B.C. the population of the current departments of Cundinamarca and Boyacá –including a part of Tolima and Santander– started to live in little family groups whose settlements were spread all over the area. Between 1000-1200 A.C. these groups established a complex society whose government was based on the authority of *caciques*. The *caciques* were considered as human gods and the most powerful sons of the Sun. Although the Muisca people never had an empire or city-states, their solar ideology had formed a religion with its own *chyquys* or priests, and a geopolitical order that divided the Muisca territory in five confederations: Zipazgo, Zacazgo, Sugamuxi, Tundama and the Independent Territories (map 1).

Map 1. Muisca territories



Source: Archivo del Banco de la República
www.banrepcultural.org/252Fnode/252F26253%3B593%3B605

When the Spanish conquerors arrived, their social, political, cultural and territorial structures were changed. Some historians assert that in only two generations -40 years approximately- their language and religion had practically disappeared (Fals Borda, 1962, p. 175). Compared to other native groups in Colombia, the Muisca were considered as one of the more rapidly assimilated into the colonial system (Herrera, 2007). Their population was spread in Indian towns and the productive men had working in *encomiendas*, *mitas* or *concertajes* –colonial economic institutions to pay the tribute (Zambrano *et al.*, 2000; Herrera, 2007). As part of the politics of protection and integration in the colonial society, the Spanish Crown gave them lands close to the Indian Towns to be used in the gathering of wood and water, as well as for agricultural proposes. It is important to say that although these towns and *resguardos* were located in their ancient territory, they did not coincide with their ancestor's settlements. One of the consequences

of this was that white men received the best and most fertile lands. The Hacienda became the main productive unit of the colonial economy and the white great landowners, the *terratenientes*, the most powerful agents.

By the 18th century the Muisca were considered a mestiza population, and many inhabitants of the Indian towns felt that integrating socially and culturally with the white gave them economic advantages. However, the *resguardos* continued to be the keepers of the main element that guaranteed the social reproduction of the ethnic groups. The Independence brought with it the promise of a new quality of life for the indigenous, but mainly their opportunity of owning communal lands. In other words, being part of the capitalistic project of the new Nation. To be Indian was a symbol of backwardness. Years later, in 1834 a process of dissolution of *resguardos* began in Cundinamarca. About that, the words Muisca and indigenous ceased to be used by their descendants. Some native last names –created by the Spanish– were transmitted and inherited. Even though their self-recognition as peasants, many Muisca never lefted their ancient lands and maintained a high degree of endogamy. As catholic, Spanish speakers, poor peasants, landowner's manpower, or a confused and mestiza population in middle of the urban and modern life, Muisca people remained silent and in apparent forgetfulness.

Although it was considered that the Muisca should be integrated to the Civilization due to their “barbaric” condition, the Spanish frequently referred to them as a people less savage and more civilized than other native groups. The contemplative and peaceful character of the Muisca, a representation that had been built by the conquerors and chroniclers of the *Nuevo Reino de Granada*, has been part of the framework of building of the new Republic since the 19th century. According to representative chroniclers as Simon and Fernández de Piedrahíta, Muisca was a great Nation (Correa, 2004; Pérez de Barradas, 1952); their most relevant caciques were compared with European kings (Medina de Pacheco, 2006), and even their religion with the Christianity. Sometimes the Muisca Nation was referred to as the fourth Indian Civilization of America, after the Mayans, Aztecs and Incas. For the *criollismo*, movement of the 19th century, the Muisca was a perfect representation of the pre-hispanic roots of the Nation (Langebaeck, 2009). Many illustrated and romantic thinkers followed with the construction of this type of representations and imaginaries about the past of the young country (Triana, 1984; Uricoechea, 1992; Langebaeck, 2005b; Gómez Londoño, 2005; Guarín, 2005 & 2010). According to Luis Fernando Restrepo (2005), the Muisca may be an element of the official educative curriculum in Colombia, but just as part of the past. During the 20th century, this resulted in an ambiguous and untenable situation for Muisca's descendants: their glorious past sentenced them to non-existence in the present. Only the communities of Cota and Chía in Cundinamarca held a blurred ethnic condition –between peasants and indigenous– due to their communal territories or *resguardos*. But the Muisca people were never at the forefront of the

rise of the Indigenous Movement in Colombia during the 20th century. This role was assumed by the indigenous people of Cauca, whose goals were, in a first moment, to recoup their lands and, secondly, the reconstruction of their culture. In other words, the Muisca moved from the center of the past to the margins of the present (Gómez Montañez, 2013b). Later, other communities started to accompany Cauca in the formation of the ethnotopolical field in Colombia. The ethnic groups of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta became the “ecologists” and philosophers of the ecogovernmentality (Ulloa, 2004); the indigenous of rainforest of Putumayo, the main “medicine men” due to the *yagé*; the Amazonian groups have been considered as the living traces of the violent process of colonization in the rubber boom; the U’was of the Cocuy, became famous for their struggles with petroleum companies; and the Emberas by their condition of being a relevant victim in the frame of the Colombian intern conflict.

I, therefore, postulate that the Muisca Awakening could be interpreted as a great Muisca people’s project to return to the center of ethnotopolitical field. Their main challenge is demonstrating and sustaining their existence as a valid ethnic actor. And although we could think that this intention implies the union and the collaboration among people that currently claim their Muisca identity and want to activate new and alternative ways of collective projects, the real situation is that Muisca Awakening is a conflictive social space due to its heteronomy. The goal of my work is to understand how these conflicts constantly change the discussed project.

The problem: Heteronomy in Muisca Ethnic Project

The current Muisca groups are divided in two: those officially recognized by the State and those that not. In 2007 I began my ethnographic work with the Muisca people studying an organization known as Muisca Chibcha People-Nation (MCPN) (Gómez Montañez, 2009; 2010; 2013a). This is part of the second group. Although some leaders and members are descendants of indigenous people from towns that no longer exist, most of them are *mestizos*. Just like the people in the Indian Festival in Pennsylvania, these people are indigenous by self-recognition. During my fieldwork I could see many sources of conflicts between them and the official Muisca communities. The greatest of such disagreements is the idea of building a Muisca Nation. Although the official communities have accepted and even worked together with groups like the MCPN, they believe that they must lead that enterprise, or at least following the constructs used by the official leaders and collaborators of other ethnic groups. So, the Muisca project must be understood as a net of alliances, collaborations, conflicts, and negotiations.

The organization Muisca Chibcha People-Nation have initiated the formation of an association of native ethnic people which integrates both official and

non-official processes of social organization. This has generated debates and struggles in three areas. First, members of each group think that the idea of a Nation could be a threat to their personal autonomy. Second, it has challenged some leaders standing as representatives or indigenous authorities. Third, there are multiple ways in which the Muisca memory and identity are based. As a result, there are conflicts between indigenous leaders as to whether they are “true” or “false” Muisca, whose actions and practices are mutually interpreted as incommensurable.

Following the Schermenhorn’s ideas, John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (1996) lay out what constitutes the features of an ethnic group: its common ancestors, its memories about a shared historic past, and the symbolic elements which define the personality, character and nature of its members (p. 6). But, actually, the settling of a shared identity and a common memory is a field fraught with conflict. The anthropological work that I want to present here is based on the struggles and disputes that have arisen from processes of framing the ethnicity of the Muisca people, taking into account these two main structural elements: identity and memory.

From an ideological point of view, the multiple levels and structures of social organization and the different processes of ethnic recognition have contributed to dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, processes of collaboration, negotiation and marginalization, as well as expressions of symbolic violence in the individual and collective level. As a result, the Muisca cannot be defined as a homogeneous identity, but a field in continuous transformation. Therefore, my research project began with the following question: how are the Muisca ethnopolitical processes constantly reconfigured by the conflicts among the multiple ways of building the ethnic memory and identity?

What does “ethnopolitical” mean? Theoretical and political factors

Once I finished my initial anthropological work with Muisca Chibcha People-Nation, I decided to continue researching the Muisca ethnicity during my PhD studies. When I went back to this community, many things had happened. Some people had left the group. Leaders had fought between themselves; as a result, some of them joined other non-recognized or official communities. The hearsay of medical and magical practices related to diseases and sexual abuses had spread. The official indigenous authorities were worried because the leaders of the *mestiza* organization were shown by different mass media as real Muisca and legitimate authorities. Many whispers kept being transmitted with respect to contracts and agreements between MCPN and public institutions to carrying out different social and political projects.

One day I was watching a video on YouTube produced and published for MCPN about their new rituals, performed in an archaeological park. The opinions and comments showed a conflictive and symbolic space of power, based on mutual

perceptions and attacks. In one of the comments I read: “We, that are the real Muisca, don’t need opportunist hippies like you”. Other answered: “We don’t need somebody to recognize ourselves, we are Muisca, period”. I felt surprised when one day I found on Facebook a group named “Group against Muisca Chibcha People-Nation”. The most shocking fact was that the image used by this group was the cover art of my first book, a photography showing a *chyquy* (priest) offering tobacco to the spirits. But things got worse when this same *chyquy* asked for the life’s plans of all communities of Cundinamarca. The life’s plans are the documents created in a collective and participative way by the indigenous communities to state their ideological principles and to design the strategies of their community development plan. Any citizen has the right to ask for and review any public document as the indigenous life’s plan. In this case the *chyquy* had made a normal citizen act; he was in his own right to do it. However, it was unacceptable to the official communities, who complained the Government Secretary of Cundinamarca.

Two things I noticed: First, the Muisca People were not a completely structured social, cultural and political group to which every member belongs in the same form, and with the same goals. This idea is inspired in the Bourdieu’s Social Practice Theory (Bourdieu, 1989). When I say that the Muisca ethnicity –as others– is a political issue, I am not just referring to the field of struggles between these corporate groups and the Colombian state for their recognition and opportunities of participation in the project of Nation, which have been denied since the beginning of the Republic. The political issue which include individual initiatives of self-recognition, transits and displacement of the identities, is related to the conflicts among different people, communities and indigenous movements too. In other words, ethnicity is a field and a social space of symbolic powers. A field is formed by social structures or sets of positions and relations between agents who, at the same time, are constantly transforming it through their schemes of perception, thought, and action or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 14). Second, the Muisca People was an ideal title to name a complex network that was not formed by groups, but by a constant formation of groups. This assertion was inspired by Bruno Latour’s Actor Net Theory (Latour, 2005).

Although we can suppose these features are present in all ethnic projects, some scholars take for granted that ethnic groups are well-defined entities. This is related to the way the ethnopolical field of studies was established and has transformed over time. The word “ethnicity” comes from the Greek linguistic root “ethnos” and its meaning involves two aspects: a number of people living together and a nation (Fenton, 2005: 14-15). It has ever been a close relation between ethnicity and Nation. The modern definition appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary of 1953, and in a general way, it shaped a field of study which purpose was to understand how people are classified and create relations between groups, in a context of ‘self-other’ distinctions (Eriksen, cited in

Hutchinson & Smith, 1996). We now use these distinctions as a relevant starting point for the understanding of political conflicts.

The nationalism and the ethnic differences were the main engine of several processes of building of States-Nations and their respective conflicts. Social sciences studied those issues generally from an analytical perspective in order to establish how the ethnic and nationalist differences were created, managed, and re-activated amidst the political transitions of Postcolonialism. The colonial system that ended in many regions of Africa and Asia allowed researchers to see the way by which racial and social differences had been activated. Genocide, the separatist goals, the projects of self-determination, the migrations of refugees and victims of national warfare became topics of study (Nordstrom & Martin, 1992; Hutchinson & Smith, 1996; Hall, Bartalos, Mannebach & Perkovitz, 1996; Guibernau & Rex, 1997; Fenton, 2003). Since the appearing of Cultural Areas Studies after WWII, the western academy classified and defined ethnics groups along the world, mainly in regions of conflict. Therefore, social sciences refer constantly to ethnic groups as taken for granted. In consequence, the academic literature on ethnopolitical matters understood these as “corporate” (Jowitt, 2002) entities which seek to gain political benefits in the State-Nations that contain them. Sometimes, these corporate entities fight against the State –represented the most of cases by a powerful ethnic group– or between themselves in “inter-group” conflicts.

With the end of the Cold War and its respective post-conflict contexts, sociology and political science have been interested in understanding the ethnicity from a comparative perspective, based on macro-social studies without regard to the individual motivations and the internal power relations of ethnic groups. Anthropology and social psychology tried to find the cognitive schemes and social structures from which the social groups mark their differences. The primordial and the instrumental were the two approaches most often applied. The first wanted to grasp the factors and features of activation of primordial ties in ethnic groups, based on shared memories, myths of origin and characters. The second approach wanted to understand ethnicity as a strategy of forming collective identities, which permitted the communities more political and economical benefits (Gibernau & Rex, 1997; Hutchinson & Smith, 1996; Fenton 2005; Kooning & Silva, 1996). In the frame of democracy and plural and multicultural societies, ethnicity is considered by some authors as an alternative used by people when their citizen status is not sufficient to participate actively in the transformation of the State-Nation’s project. That is, briefly, the meaning of “etnopolitical”.

Daniel Bell (1975), based on the emergence and subsequent boom of ethnicity studies, asserts that during the 17th and 18th centuries the emotional components of corporate identities were religions, and in the 19th century were the nationalist movements. In the modern world, ethnicity is one of the most appropriate forms of social cohesion because it combines common interests and emotional

ties, aspects that had been given by the religion and the nationalism. There are two reasons for that: firstly, the ethnic groups help people to organize in small units in plural societies where great corporate entities, such as the state and social class, have been weakened; secondly, ethnic organizations are means to win group rights or to require protection to state. For that reason, Bell (1975) argues that ethnicity is not only a re-emergency of primordial identities, but also a strategic choice for individuals who, in other circumstances, would chose other group membership as a means of gaining power.

On the other hand, ethnic identity is established and managed in relational circumstances, not where the groups are separated and isolated (Barth, 1976). This perspective replaced the classic theoretical approach that defined ethnicity as a scale process, which basic level was the ethnic category (simple cultural differences) and the most complex level the ethnic community (located in a permanent and physically bounded territory) (Handelman, cited in Hutchinson & Smith, 1996). For me, the intermediate levels of this analytical model are the most important fields where the ethnicity can be studied and understood today. These levels are: first, the ethnic networks, where there is a regular interaction between ethnic members; and second, the ethnic associations where the members develop their common interests and social-political organizations to express these at a collective and corporate level. An interesting aspect of the ethnic networks and associations is their temporal, conflictive, and changing character. That is the case of the Muisca Awakening.

In sum, the perspective proposed here enhances a comprehension of ethnicity: a) as a result of networks and associations between changing ethnic agents; b) as a constant and permanent process of group formation, not as setting of defined, closed and homogeneous groups; c) since a conflictive arena characterized by the heteronomy of the multicultural an plural societies.

Multiculturalism: where are the Muisca conflicts located?

John Rex (1997) wrote that since 1968, countries as England –historic empires and old colonial centers– began to think in its plural and multicultural condition. The presence of a lot of immigrants and refugees in the great European capitals confronted and challenged the homogeneity that the different national movements tried to impose. Inspired by events as the Civil Rights Movement in the US and their claims of the right to be different but not segregated, and the rejection of assimilation as a mean of equality and integration, Rex proposed a model of an ideal multicultural society which involve on one hand the acceptance of a single culture and a single set of individual rights governing the public domain and a variety of folk cultures in the private domestic and communal domains (p. 210). Meanwhile, Leo Kuper (1997) proposed an “equilibrium model of plural societies” in which

“the units are bound together by crosscutting loyalties and by common value standards or a competitive balance of power” (p. 222). Although this model does not imply consensus, it appeals to an optimistic view of society and of the relationship between social groups. It is, besides, the base of liberal democracy, where groups and their interests are integrated in balanced adjustment (p. 220). Based on this optimistic view, the global political frame seemed to be changing for indigenous people and their struggles for their rights.

The indigenous movements in Colombia fought by their rights of ‘to be different’ and ‘to be included’ in the building of their own destiny during the 20th century. This was one factor that made multiculturalism became a relevant break point in the Latin American politics. According to Rachel Sieder (2002), multiculturalism was an important issue related to the indigenous people’s demands for reform by states to accommodate their rights. Three interrelated factors allowed this. One was the emergence of indigenous political movements during the three last decades of the 20th century. Other was the new international jurisprudence, which increasingly characterized the rights of indigenous people as part of the human rights. Another was the constitutional reform processes in many Latin American countries which recognized –at least in principle– the multicultural and multi-ethnic nature of those societies.

I do not intend to do an in-depth analysis of those political issues, but it is possible to locate the Muisca ethnicity in that frame. The most important indigenous organizations in Colombia are place in Cauca. Their tradition of fights against the great landowners and recovery of their territories –based on the images of indigenous heroes as Juan Tama and Quintín Lame– promoted the birth of the CRIC (Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca) in 1970s, whose work inspired the creation of other movements. In the case of the Muisca people, there were local and independent processes in some towns and localities that wanted to retain the right to collective territories, but these processes never had the intention of creating a great Muisca organization. Besides, only two Muisca communities had maintained their indigenous *cabildos* (councils): Chía and Cota. The other communities appeared later.

New international jurisprudence transformed the national constitutional field. ILO Convention 169 ratified the indigenous rights as third generation human rights. This implied two things: firstly, the recognition of indigenous as ‘people’ with collective rights to autonomy, therefore, their own government, own justice, own institutions and own territories. Secondly, one of the most important aspects of this convention was that “self-recognition” became one of the main criteria to define the ethnic identity. For Sieder, as a result, the indigenous people are defined according to the criteria of self-identification and signatory governments committed to ensure equality of social, economic and cultural rights of all indigenous people within their jurisdiction. The indigenous people started to participate in the formulation of politics that affect them and to be consulted in the formulation of projects in their territories.

Colombia was the first Latin American country that transformed its political constitution to recognize its multicultural and plural-ethnic condition; that was in 1991. This allowed the organization of indigenous movements and groups previously considered nonexistent, which is part of a phenomenon called by Anthony Smith “reactivation of ethnic identities” (Smith, 1996). The organizational dynamics of *kankuamo* (Morales, 2002), *pastos* (Rappaport, 2005), *yanacunas* (Zambrano, 1992) and *muiscas* (Martínez, 2009) are examples of such reactivations. Although the Muisca people did not have political participation in the constitutional reform, neither has formed a political party or movement as others, this was an engine for the rebirth of the Muisca communities in Bogota and Cundinamarca. Bosa, Suba and Sesquilé joined with Chía and Cota in the official recognition of Muisca as indigenous people.

One shared condition among Latin American countries’ experiences was the blurred boundaries between the indigenous people and the peasants. From Mexico to Chile, the indigenous movements have fought to obtain agrarian reforms and benefits for rural communities. This also contributed to the rejection of to be considered indigenous by general society and the governments. Again, the ghost of *mestizaje* appeared, and one main fight of indigenous people was between their objective ethnic condition and their self-recognized ethnic condition. But the self-recognition as a political and subjective issue gave rise to a variety of organizations, and communities formed by *mestizos* and non-indigenous people proposed new ways of building collective identities and projects. The representation of the indigenous as ecologist, spiritualist, and an ‘authentic culture’ inspired many people in cities to align themselves with ideologies, and philosophies that were in opposition to the modern and capitalistic way of life. ‘To be Muisca’ became in a way to participate in the daily, esthetical, and political dimensions of the citizenship. It could be a field for a hard and a radical militancy, and/or a performance to activate romantic ways to tie social groups based on what Maffesoli (2007) named collective narcissism.

Politics and spirituality: understanding the Muisca Awakening

In the case of the Muisca people, two processes have constituted the basis of their ethno-political project. Firstly, the constitution of five *cabildos* (indigenous government), which permitted new ways for Muisca People to dialogue with the State, and the possibility of managing their own resources and justice. Secondly, the renewal of spirituality, medical practices, rituals, and ceremonies whose new cosmological discourses have become creative tools, methodologies and ideological sources for collective expressions (Gómez Montañez, 2009, 2010, 2011). My proposal has been to understand the connections and relations between both processes –political and spiritual–.

The Muisca etnopolitical field has been shaped and sustained by the relationship between historical elements and the reality of this community: a) the Muisca people were considered by the Spanish a culture more easily integrated to the civilization; b) they were seen as a great historic base of the Colombian Republic, then were condemned to the past; c) basically, their assimilation-integration processes during the Colony and Republic are part of the non-violent methods of finishing and managing the ethnic differences; d) they do not have a recognized and representative history among the indigenous movements in Colombia of 20th century; e) the Muisca people seem to be placed in the margins of etnopolitical field of Colombia; f) the Muisca people are part of the new ethnicities that are based on complex and different process of self-identification; g) to be Muisca is today an alternative way to be citizen in the Colombian liberal democracy context.

From a general and comparative perspective, in the recent Muisca etnopolitical project –twenty years approximately– can be identified three structural and interconnected elements: territory, cultural identity-social organization, and new spirituality.

Territory

By 1834, the *resguardos* were finished in practically all the territory of Cundinamarca (Curry, 1981). Only the communities of Cota and Chía would maintain their collective territory by the purchase of lands and the claim of others based on old titles. Although their *resguardos* were a property with a collective title of ownership, they contributed to the social reproduction of the communities based on a colonial institution. By the end of the 1980s the current communities of Bosa and Suba –who are set in the homonymous urban localities of Bogota– began their collective political project in the middle of struggles with the local government and private enterprises in which they were trying to defend old family lands from the urban expansion. The start of the community of Sesquilé was possible with the purchase of a land located in the mountains near the old Indian town.

Organization and culture

Defending their territories brought with it the necessity of reinforcing the indigenous social and political organization in some cases, and of building it in others. As a result, and even though in conflict with public institutions, Bosa, Suba, Cota, Chía and Sesquilé are today the only Muisca communities with official ethnic recognition by the Colombian State, and with their own government institution, the *cabildo*. It was also important that they strengthened their cultural identity. Ethnic recognition implies a complex political and bureaucratic process. One of its elements is the requirement of an ethnologic study carried out by an institution approved or assigned by the Office of Indigenous Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior.

Proving the existence of customs considered as part of the real staff of cultural elements of Muisca people was the main goal of the communities. The ancient myths, the native cooking, the use of medicinal plants, the seeding methods, the consumption of *chicha* or *fabqua* (ancient beverage) and the use of the extinct Muisca language were recovered –but only partially. One internal obstacle to overcome was the fact that most of the elders and descendants of Muisca communities didn't recognize themselves as indigenous. Many families were aware of their lineage and of the fact that they lived on the land of their ancestors. But their social identity was defined as part of the peasantry. As occurs in every social and political organization, the history of the *cabildos* was marked by internal conflicts based on prestige, nepotism and struggles for the correct management of economic resources.

Spirituality

Spirituality became the most relevant factor in the transformation of the ethno-political field concerning the Indigenous Movement, which claims in 1970s inspired political and social goals of many indigenous communities along the Colombian territory. As part of the romantic and rebel atmosphere that characterized some young movements and collectives, new ideologies began to call people around the exploration of alternative spiritual practices. The literature about shamanism – mainly the Castaneda's works- introduced the use and consumption of indigenous sacred plants as part of the *habitus* of the urban middle class. The influence of Samael –born in Bogota– spread Gnosticism and its relationship to the imaginaries and representations of Muisca People: their myths, gods and their territories as part of a wide net of sacred and old cultural knowledge. The new age was connected to a neo-indigenism. Some inhabitants of Cundinamarca and Boyacá, without being part of an indigenous community, recognized themselves as Muisca; some of them traveled to other regions characterized by the presence of indigenous communities –both in Colombia and other countries such as Mexico and Perú– and were initiated in shamanic practices. These practices of indigenous spirituality gave shape to a wide net of groups and collective initiatives –with different levels of cohesion and organization, sometimes alongside the indigenous communities and sometimes affecting their inner dynamics. This context was the frame from which alternative organizations such as Muisca Chibcha People-Nation born.

Spiritual and religious practices have been considered as ways of revitalizing the Muisca memory, because they connect the construction of emotive and moral connections with the past. The creation of new spiritual practices, however, sometimes confronted the challenged historical structures. Authors as Langebaeck (2005b) and Herrera (2005) in their ethnohistoric studies have shown how some Muisca communities during the 17th and 18th centuries practiced rites and ceremonies as a form of opposition of the abuses of colonial institutions. In middle of the Idolatry's extirpation and the obligatory Christian doctrine, among others,

the consumption of *chicha*, the formation of a new group of indigenous priests, and the new votives practices using little idols or *tunjos* were put in practice. But according to the authors, such practices can not be considered as a way back to the past, but as a manner to fight against the critical conditions of the present. In the same form, we must interpret the current Muisca body of spiritual practices as part of the political dimension of the Indigenous memory.

Tropes and oxymorons of Muisca Memory: discursive constructions

The memory is an exercise of the present to build the past according to social frameworks such as the family, the religion, the social class, etc. Even though this Halbwachs' idea (2004) has been the main theoretical assertion in the modern studies of social memory, recent authors as Mitzval (2005) has proposed understanding it not as a static set of commemorative practices of pre-defined collective identities, but a creative and conflictive field in continuous transformation. Just like ethnicity, memory is dynamic and relational.

During the late 1980s and into the 1990s the Muisca ethopolitical field was being built based on shaping and strengthening the indigenous *cabildos* in Bogotá and Cundinamarca as entities that allowed the official recognition of the ethnic groups by the State and as the main units of the communal and collective organization. Insofar as the indigenous organizations arose, the territory and the recuperation of cultural elements identified in the peasant uses and customs were the base of their existence, social reproduction and connection to the past. At the end of 1990s and into the first years of the new century, the presence and collaboration of other indigenous groups and their spiritual authorities –mainly from Amazonas, Putumayo and Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta– became a relevant indicator of the change of role that the Muisca ethnic groups had in the new ethnic map of the center of Colombia. As a result, the first *abuelos* (elders with Muisca spiritual knowledge) appeared as well as the first sacred houses or temples in Cota, Sesquilé and Ráquira. The *chunzúas*, the sacred plants such as tobacco, *ambil* (tobacco jelly), *mambe* (powdered leaves of coca) and *rapé* (snuff powder), as well as a renewed set of ceremonies slowly emerged as part of the new practices and performative routines. At the same time, the 'performativeness' (Gómez-Montañez, 2010) characterized the increase of a lot of members in alternative self-recognized groups. People in towns and cities and the modern life began to be influenced by the called 'neo-shamanism' and 'neo-indigenism'. The indigenous medicine and rituals became new elements in the cohesion of collectives shaped by the narcissism, sensualism, and hedonism typical of these expressions of the 'societal' (Maffesolli, 2007). In sum, the indigenous memory began to be constructed by new ethics and aesthetics.

How are the social-political and spiritual fields connected? The new religiousness and practice of indigenous medicine, with their own discourse, have supplied an emotive substratum to the organizational processes at the social and political levels. Taking into account Alonso's ideas about the State and the Nation, I can say that the Muisca spirituality has given creativity and mysticism to the institutional and organizational concretion. Besides, the ideals that have been built, argued and transmitted in the medicine spaces (vital philosophies, territorial and communal healing, global ecology, etc.) need interlocutors and participative fields into the State to be implemented in the public domain. Even though the Muisca communities have never achieved the creation of a great organization like others in Colombia, the ideal of building a Muisca People –or Nation– as a spiritual congregation has been a goal for all type of groups.

As well as the processes of building of States-Nations used tropes or linguistic figures as the kinship and the nature to create a substance or an “imagined personhood” of the members of the Nation, the ideal of constructing a Muisca People-Nation has its own tropes. According to Braw, these tropes have a special potency to shape a collective community, because they “construct the past (a memory) not just to define a common origin, but to claim a substantial identity in the present” (cited in Alonso, 1994, p. 384). In the case of Muisca people, their current substantial identity is based on the tropes of the *sleeping*, the *childhood* and the *memory*.

Awakening, being reborn, and remembering are three metaphorical figures or discursive formulas used by the Muisca to name their ethnopolitical project. Such formulas have been identified methodologically with the registration and analyses of linguistic expressions, words, and rhetorical figures which, by repetition, transmission, and appropriation have shaped a language. How can ethnography register such tropes? Bourdieu, in his chapter about the economy of linguistic exchange in his book *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991) defined the “language markets” as fields in which there are a circulation of “discourses stylistically shaped both in their production and their reception” (1991, p. 46). Therefore, whether we understand the Muisca ethnicity as a “market language” produced and received by a variety of individuals and groups, that means that there are correct and wanted “ways to speech” in the field of Muisca identity and memory.

One of the purposes of my investigation was to register the language figures used by the Muisca to connect them coherently and morally to their past. I participated in the observations of many indigenous spaces, mainly in “circles of Word”-meetings for speaking about the traditions, practices, and rituals. During fieldworks it was possible to note how the social space and symbolic powers of Muisca ethnicity is shaped. The prestige, the moral judgments and the representativeness are the issues put on the conflictive arena.

The connections between political and spiritual dimensions of Muisca ethnicity have two time frames in the construction of the indigenous memory. One is of long-term and other of short-term.

Long-term memory

It is related to narratives of the built image of the Muisca's past, whose role is to legitimize the current struggles based on the heroic acts of the ancestors. In this case, even though the Muisca people have been considered as rapidly assimilated and extinct, for their descendants the situation was very different. The Muisca people do not have fame as warriors –unlike the Caribbean groups–, although their complex social and political organizations were the result of processes of domination and territorial control. Therefore, their fights that have made possible their existence in the present are interpreted as a silent resistance. Two narratives have been identified.

The first is related to a myth-story told by some Muisca leaders, and transmitted by spiritual authorities of other indigenous groups, mainly of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and Amazonas. The story is about an ancient dance performed in the distant past by the condor and the eagle in the Muisca territory. At this place, native American people –from Alaska to Patagonia– met in a ritual to strengthen their mutual ties. One day, the condor and the eagle did not dance; they fought and killed each other. The act was interpreted as a prophecy which foretold the arrival of strange people from the other side of the ocean, the white people. This situation would bring sadness, tragedies, illness, and death to native people. But some centuries later, the condor and the eagle would return once again, would dance, and the Muisca people would be again the center of all native American brotherhood. The second story is about the *ladinos* and *chontales*. The *ladinos* were the indians assimilated and integrated by the Spanish. They learned the European language and religion and forgot their customs. The *ladino* represents every *mestiza* person born in Muisca territory, without memory of their ancestors. The *chontales* were the indians that resisted and with their behavior and practices maintained the sacred knowledge in secret. They gave to their brother their sacred tools and knowledge to be kept until the time of the Muisca's rebirth. Today, the Muisca people do not interpret their ethnic project as an invention, but as a native spirit and essence that were awakened, reborn, and remembered. Those two metaphors are classic ritual and critical models: one stage of life, a second of crises, latency and liminality, and a third of returning, reactivation, and transformation. For that reason I have named the Muisca ethnopoliitical project as a performance (Gómez-Montañez, 2010), following the models proposed by Victor Turner (1988).

These narratives are related to what Joanne Rappaport's research of *Nasa* communities in Colombia found as part of the indigenous memory (2000). The indigenous memory is, according to Rappaport, moral memory. This is composed, by my own interpretation, of two senses. First, the indigenous memories –plural– are

related to stories “about” the past and not “of” the past. They do not present “the things that happened”, but the “things that should have happened” (2000, pp. 38-39). Then, according to the images of the ancestors’ actions, the Muisca build politics of identity and memory in the present. The spirituality and its elements have contributed with moral values given to ancestors which must be continued by their descendants. The silent resistance, the patience, the humility, and a great cosmological knowledge are aspects that legitimize the Muisca ethnicity to others. The mythological stories told here infer that the Muisca people frame their present on struggles stories about the past which give them the role of brave victims of the conquest-colony-republic history. As part of the moral obligations, the current descendants must find ways of connecting their life, their families, their communities, and their own individual being to that long ago past.

As for the concepts of Muisca people based on self-recognition, I have proposed some categories that use another language figure: the oxymoron. The oxymoron permits create a meaning from the union of two apparently opposite terms. My categories are: *the myth as history* and *the indigenusness of the mestizo*. In the first, the self-recognition is based on new versions of the past. The official history is sometimes denied, as well as simply ignored. As a result, the archaeological and ethnohistoric discourses and knowledge are interpreted and used in one’s own creation of one’s identity. The Muisca myths are often complemented by other stories given by other indigenous people. But what is important here is the possibility that the Muisca people influence –based on the values and ideas transmitted in these new narratives– the decisions of the public entities in the management of archaeological sites or even in the politics related with urban expansion, sustainable development, environmentalism and the quality of life of indigenous people in the cities.

At the individual and collective level, many creative ways I have found between Muisca to connect them morally with the past. In the second oxymoron, the person that recognize him or herself as *Muisca* –being or not part of an official indigenous community- accepts his/her *mestiza* condition and starts to find evidence which legitimize the possibility of demonstrating *muiscas* heritage. This evidence includes the last names, which are of colonial origin and given to *Muisca* families as a representation of labors and places (toponyms). At the same time, the person has, as part of his/her family history, customs of his/her previous ancestors with indigenous roots. This is a case of peasantry which became indigenusness. The second oxymoron, where people that do not have peasant or indigenous roots, the indigenusness has been the result of creating and appropriating alternative ways of life in the middle of modern and urban dynamics. In those cases, being indigenous is a condition that can be learned. Again, it is important to affirm that the field of *Muisca* ethnicity is composed by a variety of groups with different ways and levels of organization and cohesion.

Short-term memory

I have called “anchors” all those creative ways used by current *Muisca* to connect their life with the values and essences proposed by the narratives built about the past. Therefore, the moral memory is shaped by anchorages that the people create to unit themselves with the ancestors and to continue their acts of fight and resistance in the present. But the moral memory has another meaning and term. When the indigenous memories propose moral values and imagined personhoods, the different groups and organization of the ethnic networks and associations establish and transform the criteria by which a member can be perceived, identified, judged and, as a result, excluded or included in the current ethnopolitical project. This is the other dimension of moral memory. This is constructed by constant, conflictive and communicative processes in which each agent, through their anchorages, plays a role in this field of symbolic powers, and legitimize and not its own actions and of the others. This happens when different leaders and members of the *muisca* organizations told their own versions of the recent history of their ethnicity. For instance, one of the most important cause of conflicts between Muisca Chibcha People-Nation and the official *cabildos* is that the leaders call themselves *chyquys* or powerful priests. Other example is the set of narratives and stories told by different members of spiritual nets about questionable behaviors and actions of those who must be excluded of some spaces of the *Muisca* ethnicity. The consequences are conflictive verbal situations between members in political meetings or attacks in the magical domain. As a result, the fieldwork has been done in conversational moments where the Muisca leaders tell the stories and show how they do have a role in the recent ethnopolitical project, based on their anchorages, to shape a conflictive field by the prestige and the representativeness.

To sum up, we could infer the next:

- a. The *Muisca* memory and identity is a field that can be identified and analyzed through linguistic formulas, which repetition, reception and constant transmission form a market language that can be registered in the fieldwork.
- b. The *Muisca* memory is a moral memory in two senses. First, the *Muisca* people have built an imagined past and they must connect their life with it. This creates a moral compromise of continuing the struggles and resistances of the ancestors. The person bases his/her process of self-recognition on “anchors”: creative ways to connect their life to new versions of the past, and finds the elements and essences of the indigenusness in his/her own *mestiza* condition.
- c. Second, the moral memory is related to narratives of short term where each person builds his/her role while perceives, defines, judges and excludes or includes others.

- d. First, the *Muisca* ethnopolitical conflict was based on the goal of the recognition by the State, general society and other ethnic groups. Second, the spirituality arose as a new social space shaped by symbolic powers, mainly sustained in the moral roles and the representativeness.

Final reflection

During my research on the Muisca Awakening several people asked me if I believed they were real indigenous people. In those occasions I have answered with other question: What does “real” mean? The most of times anthropologists are seen as judges that have a special tool which calculate the measure of ethnicity – or indigenusness in this case– of any people, mainly based on the images and representations that were built by the colonialism. As a result, our labor seems to be proving the ethnicity based on objective and essentialistic approaches, and suspecting of whatever subjective issue and instrumentalism applied. Besides, I have answered ‘Yes’; if they are able of constructing, fortifying, transforming and reproducing a collective identity based on a memory similarly constructed, fortified, transformed and reproduced to influence the spheres of public and private dominion, then they exist as real ethnopolitical projects.

As some authors have asserted, ethnicity has given us the possibility of identification and participation in the liberal democratic society when our own general condition of citizens does not suffice. It is not strange that academics as well as indigenous organizations are talking today of “indigenous citizenships” (Rappaport, 2005b) or understanding the ethnic collective projects as “alternative expressions of citizenship” (Montaña y Cabildo Muisca de Sesquilé, 2008).

Some Muisca leaders, as Henry Neuta, authority of the community of Bosa, have defined the Muisca Awakening as an “enchanted work”, where some people who wish to belong to this collective dream renounce when discover that it implies a lot of sacrifice, obstacles and frustrations. In sum, the Muisca Awakening is based on multiple transits. On one hand, the Muisca Awakening has been defined as the path from the center to the margins of the Muisca People in the history of the Indigenous Movement in Colombia, for backing again to the center. On other hand, the ethnopolitical project is understood as a set of nets, associations, collaborations, loyalties, disloyalties, where the multiple agents mark their own itineraries. Therefore, the pluralism –and probably the multiculturalism– have been replicated within the communities. Far from being considered as homogeneous and with great levels of cohesion to being part of the plural society as a corporate entity, the ethnic groups must be read as conflictive social spaces or field of symbolic powers.

Some people have questioned my work saying that studying the intern conflicts of the Muisca people affects them in negative form. But reality is different. The own

Muisca people know the importance of learning how to manage their differences and disputes to achieve the goal of building a great Muisca People-Nation. The conflicts highlight the variety within the Muisca Awakening. This dream has mobilized initiatives and processes in the social, cultural and political frameworks, at local level and at intergroup level. In the same way from which we have understood the ethnicity, the Muisca Awakening is product of constant relations and transits and it depends on the specific and particular contexts where the people have achieved changing their life's private and public aspects in positive form. For these reasons, just like as the motivations of a white man to recognize himself as native American in Pennsylvania, belonging to the wish of the Muisca Awakening is a political issue.

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